

ARCHITECTURE

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Charles A. Platt, Architect.

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ENTRANCE, PALMER HOUSE, NEW LONDON. Charles A. Platt, Arch.

CHARLES A. PLATT—HIS WORK.

AYMAR EMBURY II.

WHEN I began work as a draughtsman, everybody in the office agreed that American country house work was far inferior to that of the English practicing architects, although I think we all felt that Frank E. Wallis and Joy Wheeler Dow were both giving the Englishman a run. It was very hard to look at our work beside the English and not feel conscious of its inferiority, not so much perhaps from the standpoint of pure design as because somehow most of it did not have the sense of intimate association with the landscape and of pure and tranquil domesticity which has characterized English country house work for 500 years. It did not seem to make much difference whether the English architects designed in what we commonly think of as the English style (a sort of reminiscence of the medieval work), or whether they used the curious and lovely variant of Classic that we so often find in England. It was genuine country house architecture, seldom daring, but always original, seldom brilliant, but always charming. To-day the situation is much changed, and American architects are turning out designs which, though by no means of the same type as the English, have the same quality of design which is essential to success in this type of building. This advance in America has been by no means local (although I think that some of the Philadelphia architects have perhaps shown us the way), but now, all over the country, we find men whose work stands on a tremendously high plane: such men, for example, as Albro & Lindeberg, Oswald Hering, Davis, McGrath & Kiessling and others in New York; James Purden, of Boston; Charles Barton Keen, Wilson Eyre, Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, of Philadelphia; Spencer & Powers and Howard Shaw, of Chicago; Janssen & Abbott in Pittsburg; Myron Hunt and Elmer Gray in Los Angeles; to name only a few of the many whose work I admire and

look to for inspiration. Of them all, however, there is probably no one whose successes are so great and whose failures so few as Charles A. Platt.

To me the most interesting characteristic of his work is the fact that he uses the formal so informally, and that while most of, if not all of his work, is both balanced and symmetrical, there is none of it which is hard, dry or cold. It is precisely this fact which makes his work inimitable as any one will appreciate, who tries, as I have, to design like Mr. Platt.

There was a story told in the days of the Russian-Japanese war that General Kuropatkin was discovered seated in the middle of a great library looking through the books one after another, with anxious attention, when some one asked him what he was doing. He answered, "They say the Japanese get their tactics out of a book, and I am looking for that book." General Kuropatkin probably had the book but did not know how to use it, and in architecture as in tactics it is not the principles with which we are unfamiliar, but that we are unable to combine them with the unerring accuracy and distinction which marks all of Mr. Platt's work. Scrutiny as anxious as that which the general is said to have bestowed upon his library, has been given by me to Mr. Platt's work, and I frankly admit that I find few motives which were before unfamiliar to me, nor have I yet discovered in what lies the essence of its charm. I do not know if Mr. Platt often looks in his books; I suppose he does; and I suppose also from his work that the books are Italian and Georgian and American-Colonial, but we probably, all of us, have these books, and there are very few of us that get results at all comparable to those of Mr. Platt. It does not come with quite such a surprise when Albro & Lindeberg have designed one of their wonderful houses in the free and graceful style they oftentimes employ, since we at once feel that a part at least of its charm can be attributed to the fact that there is something in the very novelty of the scheme itself which is inclined to weight our opinions, but when Mr. Platt does one of his brick country houses, and infuses it with a freshness and vigor that he does, it is like getting juice out of an orange which has been sucked dry.

When I began my own practice I rather thought that the English and our Colonial ancestors had about exhausted the possibilities of this particular variety of work and that the best we could do was to imitate their ideas as well as possible with a certain necessary loss of charm similar to that which is lost by a book in translation. Mr. Platt has taken this time-worn, moth-eaten old style and given it a new lease of life and has so impressed us that "everybody is doing it now," and a good many are finding that after all, it is full of unexhausted possibilities. The only analogy to Mr. Platt's success lies, I think, in that of McKim, Mead & White, who have taken the old cut and dried motives, familiar from the days of the Greeks, and used by thousands of architectural students in every school competition in the world, and from them have produced real architecture. Many of us may find fault with the Pennsylvania station for one reason or another, it may not look like a station, it may be badly planned, it may be wasteful of space, but who among us is there who can design a great Doric order like that of the Pennsylvania station? We have been familiar with Doric from our school boy days, and so far as I can see the order used at the Pennsylvania station is only a very little different from that of Vignola, but with its exquisite fitness to the façade of which it forms a part it seems a

supreme test of ability in pure design. So with Mr. Platt's work we find little that is original (if to be *outré* is to be original) and yet for sheer loveliness of proportion and for exquisite fitness of its detail to the house which it adorns it is simply beyond criticism.

I wonder how many of us would find it easy to make plain to a layman by any explanation the difference between Italian work of a certain period and English Georgian. We know that they both use columns, they both use cornices, the columns are not dissimilar in proportion, the details were made up from the same old egg and dart and dentil courses, and the stone work of the two is often buff in color and fairly smooth, but I think even a layman will at once perceive the difference between English and Italian work placed side by side. It is easy to say that Mr. Platt's work is dissimilar from that of any one else and very hard to point out why. We, all of us, at times borrow from the Italians for our cornices, and from the American-Colonial for our porches, but Mr. Platt's work is neither Georgian nor Italian, although it resembles so very strongly both of them. We can only call it modern architecture, if we are of those who believe, as I do, that there is a modern style of architecture, although perhaps in a somewhat different sense from that in which the previous styles have existed, since we must include in the modern movement examples so very different as Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's Gothic churches, and Charles A. Platt's classic country work. Another thing about Mr. Platt's work which is extremely encouraging to me as indicating the general advancement in public taste is the prompt manner in which its superiority has been recognized by the public, with the result that he has had commission after commission to design country work of a size which gives his genius adequate scope. Of course there are a good many people who cannot appreciate the fact that simple and straightforward work can be anything but mediocre design, and as one of Mr. Platt's clients said when I told her how much I admired her house, "I am so glad to hear what you think of it, because my neighbors come over to look around the place and then say, 'This certainly is a comfortable house'." After all, there is no point in a home that is more important than comfort, but it is always by the exterior that an architect will be judged now by his own profession, and eventually by the world.

Most of us have designed houses along quite widely divergent lines, trying our hands sometimes at the picturesque, sometimes at the formal, and varying from half timber work to Italian, as either our tastes or our clients lead us. Mr. Platt's houses, however, have been all confined to very much the same set of motives, and yet each is as individual and characteristic as it could possibly have been if completely different types of architecture had been employed. Of course there is a certain amount of variance between the prototypes of the different buildings, the William Maxwell house, for example, at least suggesting French motives, while the Slade house (to me the most beautiful of them all) is more or less American-Colonial. All of them, however, are tinged with a certain Italian sentiment, especially noticeable in the treatment of the gardens, although when, as in the McCormick house, Mr. Platt tries really an Italian scheme, we find it not so very different after all from the Slade house—the most American of the lot. Another point of pre-eminence in Mr. Platt's work is the color and texture he secures in his materials. Several years ago an architect (now dead) whom I admired and loved

more than any one else in my profession, said that he thought Mr. Platt's superiority in this respect arose from the fact that every year he went abroad to France or Italy and studied on the spot the color and quality of wall surfaces which make old work so interesting. This may be in part an explanation of the delightful textures Mr. Platt gets in either his brick work, his stone work or his stucco work, but I think the real explanation is that he thinks more about it than most of the rest of us, and he has certainly been one of the men who have brought to our attention this very important part of design. There is still another point in which Mr. Platt has the advantage of most of us, and that is on his treatment of the grounds adjoining his buildings. Even before we thought so highly of him as an architect of houses we conceded to him a tremendously high place as a designer of gardens, and with the force of character to convince his clients as he has, of the necessity of gardening to complete the scheme, Mr. Platt's work has acquired a finish and perfection beyond what is possible to those of us who know or care little about gardening. It seems to me unnecessary to say anything about any particular one of his houses, since all of us know and admire them all, and while there may be some which we prefer to others, there are none which we can afford to pass by lightly. Perfection is perhaps unobtainable in any walk of life and in the profession of architecture, hampered as one so often is, by lack of money, or by unappreciative clients, or by the impossibility of solution of some of the problems which present themselves, or by the ignorance and stupidity of some of the mechanics with whom we have to work, and by the very unyielding quality of the materials with which we have to work, it seems impossible to ever reach perfection; but equally does it seem that so near as it is possible, has Mr. Platt arrived.



ENTRANCE, PALMER HOUSE, NEW LONDON. Charles A. Platt, Arch.



HOUSE, JOHN T. PRATT, GLEN COVE, LONG ISLAND

Charles A. Platt, Architect.

CORRESPONDENCE.

Owing to the number of inquiries which ARCHITECTURE receives from time to time, some of which appear to us to be of very general interest, we intend to publish such questions with their answers monthly. Where a definite and accurate answer is possible this will be made, but where the answer is largely a matter of opinion we can give only what seems to us a consensus of the best opinion. We invite criticisms.

Editor of ARCHITECTURE,

Dear Sir: I have in mind two architects for some work which I purpose doing—one trained in the French Beaux Arts School and the other in practical work in this country. As far as I can see they stand equally well, but before choosing between them I would like to have the opinion of some disinterested party. Can you give me the benefit of your advice? Sincerely,

R. D. F.

We have submitted the above query to several of our well known American architects, some of whom have been trained abroad and some at home. The tenor of their replies are about the same. We publish only that of Mr. Charles Ewing, a member of the Executive Committee of the Beaux Arts Society.

Editor of ARCHITECTURE,

Dear Sir: I would urgently recommend that your correspondent R. D. F. in selecting an architect between two candidates, one a Beaux Arts man and the other home office trained, would do well to make his choice on their records. Let him examine a number of their designs, look over a set of their working drawings to see how carefully they are made and let him inquire from previous clients as to his capabilities as a practical builder and a business man.

From my knowledge of the Beaux Arts training, I am certain that as a designer the presumption is in favor of the Beaux Arts man, given reasonable experience, but there are without question many good men who have not had this advantage of the school training.

Unless the information necessary for a full judgment is obtained approximately as outlined above, I think your correspondent could settle the matter most easily by tossing a coin.

Yours very truly,

CHARLES EWING.

Our own opinion on the matter is that for certain types of buildings the Beaux Arts training is probably an advantage and is in no case a detriment, unless the writer desires a building or buildings designed in a very free and informal manner, and in which the question of plan is perhaps not of primary importance. We think that no American architect can deny the immense influence for the good which the Beaux Arts methods of teaching plan have had on American architects, those trained at home as well as those trained abroad. Another possible angle from which the matter might be regarded is that the writer fears that the Beaux Arts man may not be as practical as the other, and may attempt to sacrifice utility to beauty; at least we have several times heard this objection raised to the employment of Beaux Arts trained men. As regards this point we can say most emphatically that the greater part of the Beaux Arts trained men are quite as good in every practical way as their office trained confreres, and most of them have long office training in addition to their school work back of their individual architectural practices. It is also true that there are among the Beaux Arts men a number of dilettante architects; this is likewise true of the balance of the profession, and it is most assuredly the result of the character and quality of the men themselves and not of their training. We can find architects distinguished both for the quality of their design and for their comprehensive grasp of the situation in the ranks of our home trained men; we can find others not less distinguished in either ways among those trained abroad, and perhaps there are an equal number of the best men of the

profession who acquired their sound practice in American offices and topped off with a sort of finishing course at the Beaux Arts.

Our reply to our correspondent therefore is that he must determine his choice upon the merits of the men themselves without consideration of their training; and the names of the men he has in mind not being given we can only assist him in this negative way by stating that neither foreign education or the lack of it should have weight in his choice.

THE ORIGIN OF STUCCO.

ERNEST MCCOLLOUGH.

WE do not know how early in human history lime was discovered. It was very long ago, perhaps 6,000 years. No doubt some house-holder built fireplaces of limestone and saw them calcine before his eyes. The stone crumbled and turned into a white powder, afterwards becoming hard when water was applied. The addition of sand naturally followed to save expense, and the addition of sand was found to make a firmer and harder stone, and the mixture of lime and sand set much faster than the lime alone, when mixed with water into a mortar. Lime mortar was soon introduced into the interior of houses to form a base on which to decorate the walls. On the outside a small admixture of clay was found to enable it to better resist the action of the elements. Some man later found that when gypsum was calcined the result was what we now know as "plaster of Paris," which was used to shorten the time of setting and make a harder plaster.

The addition of about fifty per cent of ground brick-dust or clay to lime-paste made a hydraulic cement, one that would set under water. This discovery, made very early in the history of construction work, enabled men to erect important maritime works and cover houses with stucco which has lasted for centuries. The Romans mixed ashes from volcanoes in the vicinity of the village of Pozzuoli with lime and produced the famous "Roman cement," the secret of which was lost for nearly ten centuries, and the search for which led to the discovery of Portland cement. The use made of Roman cement in making stucco was well known, but as the centuries went on without Roman cement, the masons forgot that anything better than lime had ever been used for mortar, either for interior or exterior work, and houses plastered on the outside were erected for poor people in all countries. The plaster was not durable, and only in Italy, where many trade secrets were preserved among masons, did the stucco house persist. A century or so ago the use of plastered exteriors came in again for houses of the better class, and plasterers and masons from Italy were employed. With the discovery of Portland cement the stucco house immediately became popular.

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXPOSITION.

IT is the intention of the Greeks of this country to reproduce in white marble on Telegraph Hill, which overlooks San Francisco Bay and is adjacent to the Exposition site, the famous Parthenon of Athens. Steps with this in view have already been taken by Consul-General Richard de Fontana of Greece and he is receiving the co-operation of the Exploitation Department of the Exposition. Consul-General Fontana has cabled King George of Greece for permission to carry out the plan and is confident that the Greeks of this country and Europe will donate sums of money to bring about the building of this magnificent structure.

THE LEANING TOWER OF PISA.

SINCE the Leaning Tower of Pisa was examined and reported upon in 1817, by Messrs. Creasy and Taylor, English architects, the amount of its declination has increased, according to a report by a Royal Commission of experts just presented to the Italian Government, by $5\frac{1}{2}$ centimeters to the lineal metre. The worst menace to the safety of the famous structure is due, they report, to the presence of strong currents of fresh water athwart the base of the tower. These currents, undermining the foundations, must have already created notable hollows in the subsoil, and, what is more serious, no effectual means have hitherto been devised for checking them. The final words of the report are: "The tower is not, we think, in immediate danger. Nevertheless, hurry up with your preventive measures if you wish to avert another such catastrophe as that of the Campanile of Venice."

BOOK REVIEWS.

MODERN ILLUMINATION, THEORY AND PRACTICE. Horstman and Tousley, 1912. Frederick J. Drake & Co., Chicago.

The matter has been treated in such a manner that it might be serviceable not only to electricians, but to architects, superintendents or managers of commercial or industrial establishments as well. In view of the present jumbled state of the art with regard to the preparing of plans and specifications, the chapter dealing with this phase cannot fail to interest all parties to contracts for wiring or illumination.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES FOR COUNTRY HOUSES. Henry H. Saylor, 1912. McBride, Nast & Co., New York. Cloth \$2.00 net. Postage 20 cents.

Each of the ten different styles employed for country houses is presented by a leading professional exponent of that particular style. It is intended to guide to a reasonable and satisfying choice the mind of an owner who, through indecision or ill judgment, stands in danger of getting something that he does not want.

The arguments present a statement of facts and a comparison with other styles with illustrations of striking examples.

ELIZABETHAN INTERIORS. C. J. Charles, 1912. F. Greenfield, New York. Limited edition.

After all, the present is very closely and intimately linked with the past and it is more than fitting to publish a book which shows clearly, and with no effort to disguise, the relation of our modern reproductions to the original English design in furniture and interior decoration. There are numerous examples of the later work, worthy of consideration, that have extraordinary merit. There is perhaps no one so well equipped with data and the other necessary material to handle a book on Elizabethan Interiors. Mr. Charles has pursued his study into the early work for the purpose of a logical development in his decorative schemes and any architect, who attempts to carry out rooms in the Elizabethan style, will find interesting and valuable information. The book itself is most artistic, the plates well presented, and handsomely bound.

CONCRETE WORKER'S REFERENCE BOOKS. A. A. Houghton, 1912. Norman W. Henley Publishing Co., New York. Paper binding; 50 cents each.

The present group, recently published, comprises: No. 8, "Artistic Concrete Bridges"; No. 9, "Constructing Concrete Porches"; No. 10, "Molding Concrete Flower Pots, Boxes, Jardiniers, etc.," and No. 11, "Molding Concrete Fountains and Lawn Ornaments."

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